

Jeroen Peeters for Mette Edvardsen, Jan 2018

The exigence of holes nests time

A collection of boundary objects for Mette Edvardsen

In front of me on my desk sits a black notebook with all manner of notes and sketches for writing. A page from one and a half years ago bears the heading “Something else” and contains a list of materials related to Mette Edvardsen’s work. I start reading at the top of the page, then pause at the end of the line to get up and walk to my right, pull a book off the shelf and return to my desk to continue checking the list and not much later find myself pacing back and forth between table and bookshelf, crisscrossing my workroom until I’ve reached the bottom of the page and stacked my desk with books and reading materials. Following the order of the list, I consult all these items one after another, sometimes briefly looking at a reference, sometimes reading away for a long time. An essay about intimate encounters with relics and the spatial texture of absences. A story by Lydia Davis, who built a fence then kept adding arborvitae, hemlocks, a young pine and more dirt and hedges until her garden appeared like a soundproof environment so she could at last go back to writing and peaceful procrastination. A hole in the floor that shouldn’t be left unexplained, especially not on a Sunday morning. An exhibition of various precious objects at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna chosen and annotated by Ed Ruscha, *The Ancients Stole All Our Great Ideas*, which I haven’t seen myself, but I remember Mette Edvardsen telling me she went there so I imagine her eye wandering around that cabinet of curiosities to meet Ruscha’s eye, just like I imagine the exhibition included the mummified baby crocodile from the Egyptian Collection that I have visited several times. An e-mail from Mette Edvardsen reporting the sighting of two crocodiles, one in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, the other in W.G. Sebald’s *Vertigo*. An essay on landscape and architecture that I don’t quite fully grasp, but which contains a passage on limestone buildings that I’ve copied in my notebook: “Close inspection of the stones reveals them to be made of the bodies of solidified animals – what could be more conclusive than that?” – a student of the author replies: “Because a thing is so certain, because it’s conclusive and inevitable, that doesn’t make it everything. Architecture’s not everything – nothing is.” A painting of houseplants, a collection of sand and a museum of the self. Padded envelopes and dead letters. After a day’s work, I’ve scrapped all these things off the list. They’re loose ends, leftovers that seem to belong to other texts than the one I’d like to write. The last book to end up back on shelf is Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*, with this soothing Zemblan proverb: “The lost glove is happy.” I’ll have to start over again. For now I’m a man sitting in a room at an empty desk.

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Over the years, Mette Edvardsen has been publishing booklets and postcards to accompany her performance works. Not so with *oslo*, unless we’d consider some of the ephemera that are informal and dispersed, or might have taken on a different substance than paper. One thing that has been travelling with the work is a stone, or better: the picture of a stone. I’ve clipped it from a theatre’s newspaper, a photograph about the size of an A4 page with the portrait of a

flat, lichen-covered stone, a stone whose actual size is probably somewhat bigger than a cobblestone. Now it sits in front of me on my desk, next to another A4 page with the programme notes. This is where I start over. In an interview, Edvardsen comments on this image: “The picture of the stone was taken last summer when I was walking in the mountains in Norway. And this information is of course totally irrelevant to the piece! But what made me choose it to represent the piece, apart from that I like the image, or the stone, was that it connected a moment of thinking about the piece with an image. And I found that interesting as an idea. An image needs to fit the piece in some or other way, but how?”

An erratic boulder, astray in my workroom. I realize that in *oslo*, it’s also been lingering around the edges of the performance, like a boundary object time and again left behind when Mette Edvardsen stated “A man walks into a room and the room is empty” or “A man walks into a room” and all the variations that were to follow. What other objects didn’t fit in that room? What do we carry with us and what do we need to leave behind for our attention to thrive and our imagination to unfold in the theatre?

I imagine the stone to be a landmark or milestone at the horizon, a signpost of sorts that indicates the limits of our imagination. The printed or remembered version has perhaps lost its physical weight, but not its gravitational pull. It’s become image and can be carried around, it’s at home in the age of mechanical reproduction – and yet it still contains a trace of its profound otherness, of its unfathomable life in nature, outside.

I take another look at the picture of the stone, but my mind wanders off before I’ve really engaged in a retinal journey. As much as the greenish crust, it must be the thin symbolic layer surrounding the stone that appeals to me. Recently the picture has drawn me to reading a scientific article on ‘Ghosts of the Anthropocene’ and lichens covering tombstones. What first struck me was a formal description of these ancient worlds. “Lichens house hundreds, thousands, or perhaps tens of thousands of other species within the thallus, including other kinds of fungi and myriad bacteria. Bacterial diversity peaks at the center of a thallus, while the various edges house relatively fewer taxa. Bacterial communities at the centers of different lichens resemble each other, while edges house more random assemblages.” Now I’m reminded of Ursula K. Le Guin, who’s compiled various fragments of the Therolinguistics Association in one of her books, inviting us to ponder the languages of ants, penguins and dolphins as well as our future literacy in deciphering these natural languages and literatures. After the phytolinguist and aesthetic critic who read Eggplant fluently, the Association’s president wonders, “may there not come that even bolder adventurer – the first geolinguist, who, ignoring the delicate, transient lyrics of the lichen, will read beneath it the still less communicative, still more passive, wholly atemporal, cold, volcanic poetry of the rocks: each one a word spoken, how long ago, by the earth itself, in the immense solitude, the immenser community, of space.”

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Even before having seen the picture of the stone I must have read the title of Mette Edvardsen’s piece, *oslo*. It’s a scramble of the four letters that could have formed *solo*, but that now host a city and perhaps an entire world. Curiously, now that I’m paging through the

theatre's newspaper again, which contains a hole where I've cut out the picture of the stone, I discover the piece is announced as *olso!*

In search of a title for this essay, this morning I actually started to play around with an anagram generator myself. The process didn't quite reveal how fetish or gem fit the stone lexicon, or how sheets transform into ghosts, nor, for that matter, what's going on in Mexico, but it was a joyful wasting of time. On a scrap of paper sitting on my desk remains a trace of my not getting anywhere:

Scenes infest ghetto home exile
Oh men see the exotic signs fleet
The one shoe left seems exciting
The text flees sonic hegemonies
The exigence of holes nests time

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Daily routines are part of my workspace. Reading the newspaper for instance, not so much to keep track of what's going on in the world, but to find a lead that gets my mind going, supports me in outwitting myself so that eventually I might catch myself at my desk in the act of writing. This morning, before the anagram generator came to my aid, I read and clipped an article in which a writer describes his workspace in detail, to end his tour with a remark on the central activity, which I dearly embraced as encouraging advice: "Wasting time, perhaps. Fiddling about and getting nowhere. But what else did you think writers do all day? Write?"

Students of mine who attended a public talk by Mette Edvardsen told me she carries a workspace inside her head. For her it's a way to negotiate arbitrary productional circumstances and generic residency spaces. Even though the physical features of the room she is actually working in might be changing all the time, the imaginary workspace allows her to remain in the same environment and carry on where she has left off the day before. Roland Barthes has often commented on the structuralist neurosis that pervaded his workspace and daily schedule – structures he would painstakingly reproduce when he found himself in a hotel room or in the countryside. A clerk's schedule suited him better than a loose timing, which "would require a permanent state of excitement." It's remarkable what narrow, clear-cut frames he needed to arrive at the intuitive, sensorial thinking he's known for. In a caption to three pictures of his workspaces, he wrote: "My body is free of its image-repertoire only when it establishes its work space. This space is the same everywhere, patiently adapted to the pleasure of painting, writing, sorting."

I wonder what the features of Mette Edvardsen's workspace are – is it just a space inside her head, or does she also have routines and a workroom in which particular, real things matter to the pleasure of writing? I try to imagine something slumbering in there that remains hard to grasp: vast recesses of time spent and wasted – *wasted* to what, exactly?

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My desk has become strewn with notes and filled up again with books, all of them connected through the work of Mette Edvardsen – at least, that’s what brought them together. What now strikes me is the contrast with the dim yet lively greenish palette of the picture of the stone: the view of my desk is surprisingly devoid of colour, merely an affair of black and white, letters and signs. There is a book with a black cover and white lettering that reads *Post-Dance*. And another one with a white cover and black lettering that reads *On Longing* – a book on books, everyday objects and collections, on the narratives they hold and the desires and imaginary bodies they arouse. Next to that a pile of slim books by the Argentinean writer César Aira – an author of quirky novellas recommended to me by Edvardsen. They’ve got plain white covers with a few lines on them that suggest a book, a painter’s easel, and a room. The latter reminds me of the corner taped to the wall in Edvardsen’s piece *Private Collection*, a doubling of space that makes room for the imagination to multiply – how many rooms could these lines host?

I inhibit my temptation to wander off into those rooms, remain in *this* room and try to hold on to my thoughts. “A man walks into a room without having made a decision about how to advance.” I find myself lingering on a threshold, if not multiple thresholds, between here and there, now and then, between the rich colours and textures of the world out there and the abstract spectrum of lines and letters in front of me, between imaginary workspaces and embodied imagination, between an erratic boulder at the horizon and an empty room. What could these various contrasts tell me about the writing of *oslo*? At some point I might be able to simply repeat Mette Edvardsen saying “A man walks from one room to another.” If only it were that simple!

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Looking for something else, I pick up the book with a black cover and white lettering. It contains a brief essay which Mette Edvardsen wrote during the preparations for *oslo*. Entitled ‘The picture of a stone’, this text is yet another remediation of the erratic boulder. “The image of a piece precedes the piece, but even if I care about how a work is communicated, also visually, the piece is indifferent to it.” After writing a paragraph about the picture, Edvardsen goes on musing about choreography as writing: “In the piece I am working on at the moment I try to do as little as possible on stage. Not because I’m lazy or tired, also not to provoke. It is not about my absence or about not doing, but it is about something else than my presence and what I am doing. And this ‘something else’ is what making a piece is about for me. What is this larger notion of the written?”

Again I’m thinking of the erratic boulder and everything else time and again left behind when Mette Edvardsen stated “A man walks into a room and the room is empty” or “A man with relevant knowledge walks out” and all the variations that were to follow, while trying to do as little as possible on stage. Edvardsen’s larger notion of the written must involve a keen process of selection and erasure, of unwriting perhaps. But I’m also thinking of these words Edvardsen wrote in relation to her group work *or else nobody will know*, words that have both intrigued and puzzled me since I first read them over a decade ago: “Although the pieces seem to contemplate emptiness and absence, this is only there as a consequence of

the existence of something else.” The existence of something else. Over the years, throughout Edvardsen’s body of work, this ‘something else’ has been migrating and transforming, yet it remains somewhat elusive. Now I imagine the stone to be a counterweight to what at first could be mistaken for bare modernist aesthetics. Even though *oslo* is an invitation to travel lightly, perhaps there is no entering that empty room of the theatre without the erratic boulder flimsy as a folded piece of paper tucked away in one’s memory pocket. It’s not so much that nature or the world are a precondition for representation, but that the threshold to the empty room has by now expanded into a landscape populated with symbolic objects, imaginary workspaces and acts of remediation. What do we carry with us and what do we need to leave behind for our attention to thrive and our imagination to unfold in the theatre? Trying to do as little as possible on stage so that a sense of something else might occur – what’s the space of reading such writing?

“A man walks into a room in front of our eyes.” Still sitting at my desk, not quite out there beyond that threshold, I continue reading the essay. In the theatre, the composition of attention is a collaboration of many actors – people and technologies, text and space, little things and other bodies, moments and drafts of air. It’s a choreography in which the peripheral and details matter, and, just like any other writing and the space of reading it opens up, Edvardsen writes, it will never be finished. She admits that sometimes it’s good to know when to stop though, which might be just a beginning, perhaps even of a mindset: “Let’s take care of the gaps.”

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How to move on, how to speed up my trip to the empty room? From the stack of books on my desk I take up the one on top, César Aira’s *The Literary Conference*, and, paging through it, halfway I land on a passage in which the narrator travels to another city to attend the staging of a play he’s written years before. During his trip he considers the quantity of things that are happening to him while nothing is happening. “I noticed this as my pen was moving: there were thousands of tiny incidents, all full of meaning.” Writing requires him to choose, yet he also finds that travelling incites “the objective equivalent of cerebral hyperactivity” that is quite different from the course of normal habitual life, “because our perceptions awaken when we leave our habits behind, we see more and hear more, we even dream more.” The writer might want to arrive at the effortless velocity of the Great Work, yet all manner of temporal unfoldings and methodological confusion loom on the way.

I remember travelling from Brussels to Leuven to see *oslo*, a trip that took an unexpected turn on the platform where I was waiting for the train in the warm autumn air, probably daydreaming, when I caught sight of a woman in bright red shoes, with whom I exchanged glances a moment later when boarding the vehicle, before she moved out of sight again. Then my memory fails me, though I remember the spark of the red shoes, my being excited about travelling together with, well, who knows, the Muse and wondering what this encounter would have in store for me. I also remember thinking of that moment at the beginning of Mette Edvardsen’s *Opening*, where she appears in front of the curtain and laconically announces: “Ladies and Gentlemen, I am sorry to tell you that Miss Page is unable

to dance tonight, nor indeed any other night. Nevertheless we've decided to present the piece." It's a quote from the film *The Red Shoes* in which a tragic ending also turns out to contain a new beginning as the red shoes will continue to dance on their own. How long would the magic last for me? The next thing I remember is me walking down the Bondgenotenlaan in Leuven and the woman in the red shoes reappearing in front of me whilst walking down the same street with her elegant gait. I increased speed so as to catch up with her, came level and saw her holding a score and singing in a soft voice whilst walking. Was I hallucinating? The Muse gave my fantasy a boost but also fuelled my stride, so before I knew I found myself gradually speeding up then rushing to the theatre with a palpitating heart, leaving her behind again.

Before Mette Edvardsen looked at the empty stage, leaving the erratic boulder and everything else time and again behind when she stated "A man walks into a room and the room is empty" and "A man walks into a room and it's the beginning of a story" and all the variations that were to follow, she was lingering at the edge of the stage and told an anecdote in a casual manner. It came to her when her seven-year old daughter asked her what she does in case of a memory lapse on stage. Edvardsen told us she remembered talking about this during a public conversation on her work, where, as I remember it, she thought she would be relating a familiar anecdote for the umpteenth time. Years ago, while she was performing, a man left the theatre carrying a restless child on his arms, and even though they tried to leave as quietly as possible, right after coming down the tribune, passing the first row of seats and ending up at the edge of the stage, the child dropped her shoe, which first landed with a dull thud on the stage, then confused Edvardsen as she didn't quite know how to relate to this everyday event invading the performance, and then followed a memory lapse, which moreover made her skip the cue for the other performer to reappear on stage, so something didn't quite happen, things got into a muddle and her anxiety grew. I remember by that point being slightly confused by the many layers of the story and wondering whether I had perhaps missed the punch line. I also remember finding it curious that Edvardsen was holding on to some papers while telling the story, without ever looking at them. At least it provided her with something to hold onto when facing that void and lingering on the multiple thresholds between text and delivery, memory and present, stage and audience, theatre and world, I thought, and then, before veering off on yet another sidetrack, Edvardsen returned to the public conversation, where a woman in the audience wanted to know "Whatever happened with the shoe?" and made Edvardsen first realize, then and there, the unfathomable extent of her blackout. I remember being seated in the last row, leaning back and spying on the audience from that somewhat hidden place, enjoying that moment for myself in anticipation of what was to come. A flying hare fled the wild garden.

Now, writing this text on the larger sense of the written, I still wonder what it is that Mette Edvardsen carried in or left behind by telling the anecdote on the doorstep to the empty room. Her playing with an air of spontaneity and improvisation did mark a difference to *writing*, to the writing contained in the pages she was holding but not yet consulting, and to the tight writing of what was to come. This thought became clearer to me while reading Susan Stewart's *On Longing*, which is concerned with the manifold languages embodied in oral cultures, objects and the materiality of signs, things overlooked, left behind or transformed

with the advent of printing and writing technologies. Are such sharp contrasts not a structuralist fantasy that aims to realize an ideal of *langue* over *parole*? Or a modernist approach that attempts to wrest the abstract world of the text from the irreversible yet predictable temporality of everyday life? “A man walks into a room full of unrealized possibilities.” Paradoxes, slippages and various kinds of nostalgia abound in these conventions for organizing and interpreting lived experience – all of them aspects of that larger sense of the written. In *A Brick Wall*, what I take to be an autobiographic story, César Aira writes about his childhood fascination with the movies, a world in which “every image, every word, every gesture had meaning,” in contrast with “the chaotic muddle of signs and meanings that constituted reality.” At the ultimate horizon of modernism sits Hitchcock’s virtuosically emptied *North by Northwest*, leaving the protagonist trapped in a conspiracy without an object. “The form that encloses this emptiness could not be more perfect, because it’s nothing more than form, in other words, it doesn’t have to share its quality with any content.” Aira goes on writing about the nature of childhood memories, about their pointing to what has been forgotten and erased from memory, that means to a state before things got named and framed, before culture stereotyped experience through narrative means, and here the flipside of Hitchcock’s horizon comes into view, to retreat at once as the thought unfolds in and through words. “When thought attempts to examine its own roots, perhaps it is trying, unwittingly, to return to a time before it existed, or at least trying to dismantle itself piece by piece, to see what riches it conceals.” He writes about thought, but I wonder whether we could perhaps say the same of the minerals that underpin the cosmogony of attention and imagination. Aira adds a brief note on the meaning of nostalgia: “perhaps the object of longing is not so much (or not at all) an innocent state of nature, but an incomparably richer, more subtle and developed intellectual life.” Indeed, an allegedly improvised gag to cover up a memory lapse that happened at another time, an everyday story carrying a black hole – isn’t that yet another incarnation of the erratic boulder?

I return to the book I was reading and, just like César Aira’s narrator is selecting, somewhat haphazardly, the facts that allow him to carry his story forward at the speed that suits his poetics of “flying forward”, I skip a few pages ahead to arrive in the airport, where an ad hoc theatre is set up for the staging of the play, and I read on. “Though they had reserved a seat for me in the front row, I preferred to watch it from further back, standing up, hidden – one could say – ‘in the wings,’ that is, behind the plants, because the show was being staged in a garden (...). It was a marvellous garden, though somewhat wild; at those latitudes it is difficult to keep vegetation under control. Bushes with flame-like flowers surrounded the palm trees, the banyan tree spread its eavelike branches in all directions, the fern fronds formed dense screens, and everywhere hung enormous yellow, violet, and blue orchids. The leaves of some of the plants were so large that one was enough for me to hide behind. I enjoyed spying on the audience.” Standing there, on the threshold of that wild garden and what I imagine to be an empty stage, before the first lines were spoken, he realized: “I underwent some kind of doubling of the self.”

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Not sure how to get to the empty room, I decided to take a break and allowed to lose myself in another novella by César Aira, *Varamo*. It's a detailed description of the twenty-four hours leading up to the clerk Varamo writing a masterpiece of avant-garde poetry in a single night – how come a clerk without any writing experience and the imagination of a bookkeeper arrived at such a feat? Was he struck by inspiration, or merely a product of altogether arbitrary circumstances? Halfway the book, Aira pauses to explain in a rather ironic fashion his method for analysing the relation between Varamo's work of experimental literature and the real-life circumstances from which it emerged. "All the critic has to do is translate each verse, each word, backwards, into the particle of reality from which it sprang." The size of the elements can differ widely, and so are the relations between them, as well as the order in which they are arranged. In short, for the critic anything goes, and "the result can have a rather surrealist air" or be mistaken for a novel itself. Yet, the notion of "particles of reality" appeals to me, just like the idea of a novel that in its haphazard unfolding seeks to approximate the imaginary workspace of an author. In *Varamo* these particles take on the form of counterfeit money, a piece of candy, an embalmed fish, a mulling over the fundamental problem of "*how to feign innocence*" and the intricacies of improvisation that cause one a headache, "regularity rallies", a bush in a park, and so on. They're made up by Aira as he goes, and at the same time they function as tropes: not merely concepts, but symbolic objects that live in literature yet maintain an irreducible materiality that do make them resonate with the world outside. They're the erratic boulders that litter and underwrite the imagination of writer and reader and mediate the abstraction of words strung together on a page – and, in that larger sense of the written, I suspect, also in the empty room of the theatre. By then, Aira has shifted gear after a car accident and moved on in a lengthy explanation of the regularity rallies, until suddenly, maybe ten pages further on, Varamo "was in a room that he had never visited before, where everything was new and unfamiliar to him." My mind must have been wandering, because how did he get there from walking down the street? I reread a couple of pages, yet the mystery remains, also to Varamo himself: "He'd entered this room in such a hurry that he hadn't registered the transition; his consciousness had failed to take it in."

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"A man walks into a room and keeps quiet about everything that doesn't happen."

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At no point was I thinking of the erratic boulder when Mette Edvardsen conjured up entire worlds in a single utterance, worlds time and again dropped or erased with the next sentence. Nor when the words slipped off the page into the empty room full of real and imaginary people, when they travelled from mouth to ear, or reverberated as a choir of voices. Nor when they slid on two LED-panels in red illuminated lettering, their speed challenging my pace of reading, until their letters took on a life of their own and ended up scrambled into visual poetry. Nor when the words named numbers, not quite up to infinity yet allowing me to imagine the realm of the sayable in all its amplitude without entering it.

The empty stage contained everything that is possible as well as everything that is not possible in our world.

I remember an overall sense of retreat into an abstract realm, a detailed and somewhat dizzying choreography of attention reaching for the edges of language yet also hinting at the gestures of exclusion, erasure and forgetting inherent in that flight. I remember flashes of red light that gave way to a series of words gliding by on an LED-panel, re-establishing a balance of sorts near the end: “street – house – voices – trees – darkness – light – candle – flowers – keys – pocket – world”. I remember thinking they provided a minimum constellation of words that affords a world inside a room – and now, even though I wasn’t thinking that in the empty room, I’m tempted to add: *as if* these words were a handful of pebbles.

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“A man walks into a room where darkness is defined by light.”

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The picture of the stone still sits in front of me on my desk. If not as a handful of pebbles or as letters dissolving into stardust, when and how did the erratic boulder resurface? After the blackout that swallowed the empty room, after the applause and Mette Edvardsen taking a bow, the choir mingled among the audience broke into a song. They had been there all along, softly giving voice to the empty room full of real and imaginary people from halfway through, but only then, after the end of the performance, did the choir come out in an unrestrained manner, singing loud and with a sense of grandeur, as if they were carrying the lyrics with conviction. “This is the dream / he carries through the world / that something fantastic will happen.” And yet, occurring in the indeterminate zone after the applause, it was not an apotheosis but an encore, a moment of excess that briefly lingered on the fringes of the work. Another boundary object, contained in a song. What flashed into view was perhaps not so much a community carrying that song and that dream, but the nostalgia of an oral culture in which maker and user are akin, a space of folklore that is *other* to writing, to art and its modernity. It’s that very flash which illuminated and displaced the altogether wobbly threshold one last time, inviting another dance afforded by the larger sense of the written. Under that spell, sitting in the last row of the theatre and finding myself oscillating between the transubstantiation of experience and the promise of abstract forms, for a moment I could imagine I was an embodiment of Schrödinger’s cat, simultaneously true and false – in short, in that elusive moment, the erratic boulder, *c’était moi*.